

# Notes on Urban Planning and Railroads, Railway Conference

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by Lloyd Axworthy  
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**FOR INFORMATION:**

***The Institute of Urban Studies***

The University of Winnipeg  
599 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg  
phone: 204.982.1140  
fax: 204.943.4695  
general email: [ius@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:ius@uwinnipeg.ca)

***Mailing Address:***

***The Institute of Urban Studies***

The University of Winnipeg  
515 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9

**NOTES ON URBAN PLANNING AND RAILROADS, RAILWAY CONFERENCE**

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INSTITUTE OF URBAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG  
515 PORTAGE AVENUE  
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA R3B 2E9

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NOTES ON

URBAN PLANNING AND RAILROADS - RAILWAY CONFERENCE

Lloyd Axworthy  
Director  
Institute of Urban Studies  
University of Winnipeg  
October, 1976

Normally defendants of passenger trains and railroads are looked upon as an eccentric breed, some strange society of nostalgic romantics.

Arrayed against them are the rational hard-nosed planners with their cost accounting formulas, volume studies and economic tools. It's obviously an uneven fight.

This division has been particularly evident in the area of urban planning particularly in matters of urban transportation. Urban transportation planners were the first slide-rule analysts and built up an impressive mystique of how their decisions were based solely on sound principles of efficiency in the allocation of resources, and movement of goods and services. The conventional wisdom established by such experts has been that rail transit is not suitable for most passenger purposes, other than in areas of very high density, and this has set a very strong bias against its application over the last several decades.

However, this position is under challenge on a number of different counts, and it is this present reassessment of the basic tenets of urban planning that should give some reason for the reconsideration of the rail system and its usefulness in the urban context.

What then are the challenges?

First is the one of credibility. Many of the pet schemes and panaceas that dominated urban transportation planning in the past have proven to be of dubious value. The obvious case of freeway construction is now a well known example of how the expectations raised by the planners have gone wrong. One can also point to more recent evidence that most transportation systems don't deal with the needs of significant numbers of people who happen to be old, poor, young handicapped, or have other special problems. And should the demise of old streetcar and trolley systems in the name of progress, only to be resurrected thirty years later also be mentioned?

This particular loss of faith in the conventional nostrums of urban transit planning is compounded by recent analysis that indicates that the prescribed solutions are not necessarily the product of objective analysis and application of technical knowledge, but in fact the product of political pressures and conflicts. One reason why public transit gains short shrift is because there is not a sufficiently strong political constituency to offset the coalition of industrial interests and administrators who favour road or air

transport.

An additional factor, perhaps one of even more telling argument, is the emergence of a broader based set of assumptions in the field of urban planning. No longer is it possible to design various forms of public works, transit systems, housing projects solely by cost accounting criteria or limited engineering or technical factors. The impact of public urban initiatives must now be measured in terms of impacts upon regional environmental systems, land use decisions, influences upon community structures, behaviour patterns, and social relationships.

While there is a tendency by some to scoff at these "soft" considerations in planning, because they are often not quantifiable, they are just as valid, if not more so than the previous calculations which were far too restrictive.

In addition, the time scale of urban planning, and the context in which it is applied has been altered. It is no longer possible to approach urban transportation considerations in short term formulas, nor to confine the field of study to any one urban settlement area.

The examination of transit options must be seen in a regional context with an estimate of how such options will affect other facets of the human settlement network within a region. A classic example is how rail line abandonment will influence the movement of people on the prairie region into urban areas and what the costs/benefits of such

a population surge over time will be.

One obvious criticism that this "ecosystem" approach to urban planning suggests is that there are a number of false economies attached to conventional notions of planning, or public policy decisions taken only by an accountant's yardstick. What appears to be a cost saving, or a lower subsidy rate of, for example, a public bus system versus a rail transit system, may be reversed when calculating costs in terms of energy, pollution, etc., or if such additional side benefits such as increased land values along transit routes are not considered.

Of greater importance than this however, is the relative loss of transportation as a tool in shaping the urban environment, by using old style planning. Transportation as we well know from our study of Canadian history is a "principia media," to use Karl Mannheim's term, in the shaping of social, economic and geographical processes. It can have enormous impacts on where people live, how they live and how well our urban system is able to supply needs. Up to now, the calculation has been based on a limited number of dimensions, and is often reactive, i.e. trips to work/home calculations, without consideration of the full range of impacts.

On these grounds alone, there is sufficient reason to pause and reassess the validity of present concepts and operational principles which dictate the style and approach to urban transit planning.

But to make the case more concrete, let us examine how one might look at the issue of rail facilities and their application upon the urban system of the Prairies. This is not definitive, but only suggestive, as obviously the development of more extensive scenarios would require detailed research and analysis.

First, there is the necessity to overcome the initial surprise at referring to an urban network or system on the Prairies. This is no longer a region where only deer and antelope play or grain waves in the wind. The population of the five largest urban areas on the Prairies is close to two million people, and will be closer to three million by 1990. Furthermore, each of these urban areas is now experiencing a rapid escalation and sprawl and the development of smaller urban settlements within a thirty to sixty mile radius, forming extensive areas of urban fringe development. In some cases, there are distinct patterns of corridor development such as Winnipeg-Selkirk or Calgary-Edmonton.

Such growth patterns pose questions for the transportation links in these urban settlement areas. For example, as the Prairies grow in economic strength and urban settlement, a certain threshold of activity will take place that will greatly expand the demand for communication and travel between urban prairie centers. We usually talk of the need for high speed rail transit connections being justifiable only in the urban corridor of Eastern Canada. Yet if one looks at the extensive

high speed rail transit system being developed in Europe between secondary centers, and compares it to the potential for increased commercial, business and financial transactions occurring between Prairie cities, as opposed to the present system whereby the links are Calgary-Toronto rather than Calgary-Winnipeg, then one can project increased usefulness of a rail transit. In part this is dependent on how effective other policies may be in creating managerial, commercial, financial centers of activity on the Prairies as an objective of regional growth, but it would be wise to include improved rail transit as a component of these policies.

Another manner in which rail transit would play a role, depending on the planning objectives, would be in shaping the present pattern of urban sprawl and stretch. For example, the rail rights of way provide a corridor for influencing the urban fringe development along more concentrated linear lines or radial lines as opposed to shapeless scattering.

Another consideration is the potential development of satellite town networks as a way of shaping urban growth in the Prairies. Take the example of Selkirk-Winnipeg. The town of Selkirk is becoming a major growth center twenty miles from Winnipeg with unconstrained sprawl occurring in between. The development of an effective high-speed transit corridor would control and regulate such a development, and make the development of such a new town site plausible.



One can even extend the concept to the planning of a growth center network on the Prairie region, a much talked about but generally neglected idea. Smaller growth centers, i.e. Estevan, Yorkton, Prince Albert, et al. linked into Regina and Saskatoon by a moderate speed but highly reliable system, not only might provide efficient linkages, but would also enhance the potential of these areas to retain and expand population, because of the improved accessibility to urban areas.

A recent report provides some indication that there is a move back to the country. But those who make such a move want access to urban amenities and services. This means a need for effective linkages.

These potential uses, of course, must be seen in the backdrop of rising costs of hydro-carbon fuel for autos, trucks and airplanes. Without having the power of prediction, rail transit could well be a critical element in insuring that we are able to link and connect the new human settlement areas emerging on the Prairies. It would be wrong to suggest that heavy investment in fancy new technologies would be required. As recent studies show a major concern of rail transit users is reliability in scheduling and high frequency of service. This means a decidedly different attitude on the part of railroads, concerning priority use of tracks, up to date reservation systems, and close management of scheduling. It also assumes, of course, that there might be some planning on the Prairies about urban growth - where and how. So far this has not taken place. But it should. And if and when it does, and such planning arrives at the

conclusion that an effective rail transit system is a key ingredient and in the meantime that system is gone, won't we all look a little stupid.

In addition to these issues of macro-planning on the regional scale, let's look at some specifics of what it means on the local central city scale.

An important fact is that of the increase in population on the Prairie region, a disproportionate number will be old people. Demographically they will be as many as 15% of our population by 1986. Old people do not travel by car, and if given a choice, matters of convenience and schedule held constant, their preferred mode of travel is train. So, you have increased numbers of old people, many of whom have discretionary income. How do we provide the means for them to move from Saskatoon to Regina to visit friends, or relatives, shop, see a concern, or whatever?

The same kind of question can be asked about other growing numbers in our population group - working women, single parents, young people, those on low income. As car travel becomes prohibitive, how do they move to new jobs, go on vacation, go out to the beach. The choice is between bus or train, and there should be a choice.

So if one is planning for the Prairies in terms of manpower mobility, tourism and recreation, and provision of travel opportunities for these groups when the car is not suitable nor possible, then it

means that the options should be kept open.

Finally, let me deal with some concerns that relate directly to the issue of specific urban environments and how they might be affected.

One of the important tradeoffs in the present climate of concern over the preservation of older neighbourhoods is to find ways of avoiding any further disruption of older areas by new transportation routes.

This puts a priority on already existing rights of way such as rail lines. Two examples of this are the use of such rail lines in Edmonton for their new LRT system and the proposed use of CNR rights of way for a high speed system in Winnipeg. There is no reason why such rights of way cannot be utilized for multi-purpose transit uses, as both the Winnipeg and Edmonton proposals suggest.

The obvious corollary of the use of existing rail lines is the continuation and enhanced use of old rail stations as multi-mode transit terminals. One advantage such stations have is central location which means they are not only appropriate as terminal points for the primary transit system, but could also serve as terminal locations for secondary systems. The Dash system in Winnipeg or jitney-type systems servicing local community needs of the aged,

handicapped, etc., can be inter-connected at downtown rail terminals with primary intra city systems or inter-city systems.

This should run counter to the fashionable trend of a few years ago which dictated that stations be moved to fringe locations in order to gain better use of their central city sites. Such calculations look shallow in hindsight as we can now see a number of potentially functional uses that can be developed in existing station sites. Indeed, one of the major advantages rail transit has in inter-city movement is the ease of access to central cities, compared to air travel, for example, where a good part of the time is consumed in airport to center city travel. This advantage increases as downtown congestion grows worse.

This does not mean that yard space surrounding the terminals cannot be converted into mixed use sites. But the station itself should be retained as a central part of the transportation system. Again the CNR East Yard proposal in Winnipeg incorporates the notion of a functioning station as part of a new downtown mixed use complex of housing recreation and commercial development.

It is true as well that a certain argument can be advanced for preservation of station sites for historical and heritage reasons. While there is a case to be made, I believe a much more logical one is to insure that such stations have a functional use - central to the re-arrangement of new transit and movement patterns of the

central system, rather than a decorative appendages.

Again this particular use of rail rights of way and re-use of terminals is dependent upon the application of different planning concepts and different funding arrangements for urban transit. Present policies on railway relocation do not appear to reward innovation in the recycling of present rail systems, but rather their removal. This obviously biases the planning decisions made.

Furthermore, there is little money for improvement and change in the development of secondary transit systems that would operate out of central terminals with what money there is being devoted to the more glamorous new technological system. Yet it is the secondary system which may have a far greater impact upon many presently neglected needs.

In any event, without further prolonging the case, I believe there is now sufficient evidence for a reopening of the case for rail as an integral part of the planning of urban settlements on the Prairies. What is now required is some political leadership to make that happen.